DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 069 EC 302 748

AUTHOR Ysseldyke, James E.; And Others
TITLE Parents of Students with Disabilities and Open Enrollment: Characteristics and Reasons for Transfer. Research Report No. 5. Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.
INSTITUTION Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Coll. of Education.
SPONS AGENCY Special Education Programs (ED/OSERS), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 92
CONTRACT H023C0004
NOTE 49p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; *Decision Making; *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Characteristics; Family Income; *Free Choice Transfer Programs; Parent Attitudes; Rural Areas; *School Choice; State Surveys; *Student Characteristics; Transfer Students; Urban Areas
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; *Minnesota

ABSTRACT

This report examines the characteristics of students with disabilities who participate in Open Enrollment (one of seven enrollment options available in Minnesota), the reasons they participate, the sources of information, and the decision-making process involved in choosing another district. A survey was conducted of 219 families of students with disabilities who had applied for the open enrollment option for the 1990-91 school year. The study found that students accessing open enrollment were distributed rather evenly across family income levels, elementary and secondary levels, and rural and metropolitan locations. There was no open enrollment participation of African-American students with disabilities. Reasons often cited by parents for transferring their child were: the child's special education needs being better met at the new district; more personal attention from the teacher; and dissatisfaction with the resident school. How these reasons differ as a function of disability category, location, grade level, and parents' income or education level was also examined. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/JDD)

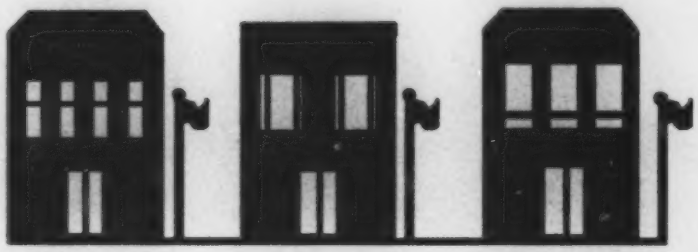
****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 367 069

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Parents of Students with Disabilities and Open Enrollment: Characteristics and Reasons for Transfer

Research Report No. 5



Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

James E. Ysseldyke, Cheryl M. Lange,
Deborah J. Gorney, and Yiu-Yeung Lau

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

April, 1992

EC 302 748

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Research Report No. 5

Parents of Students with Disabilities and Open Enrollment: Characteristics and Reasons for Transfer

James E. Ysseldyke, Cheryl M. Lange, Deborah J. Gorney, and Yiu-Yeung Lau

Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities

University of Minnesota

April, 1992

Abstract

The characteristics of students with disabilities who participate in Open Enrollment (one of seven enrollment options available in Minnesota), the reasons they participate, and the sources of information and decision-making process involved with choosing another district are examined. Surveys were sent to 347 parents of students with disabilities who had applied for the Minnesota school choice option, Open Enrollment, for the 1990-1991 school year. The reasons parents give for transferring their children through Open Enrollment was investigated. How these reasons differ as a function of disability category, location, grade level, and parents' income or education level was examined. The child's special education needs being better met at the new district, more personal attention from the teacher, and the dissatisfaction with the resident school were reasons often cited by parents for transferring their child. Implications for policymakers, school administrators, and teachers are discussed.

This project was supported by Grant No. H023C0004 from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. The views expressed are those of the authors, and not necessarily of the funding agency.

Parents of Students with Disabilities and Open Enrollment: Characteristics and Reasons for Transfer

As America nears the 21st century, there is considerable discussion about the status of the country's educational system. Reforms are being offered at many levels of government and in the private sector. Central to the discussion of the oft mentioned reforms is school choice. Already over 25 states have passed or proposed school choice legislation (Education Commission of the States, 1989; Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1992). School choice has taken many forms in these states; from open enrollment to magnet schools to charter schools. Central to these programs is the parents' involvement in choosing a school for their child.

Parents' right to choose their child's school is given as a primary reason for the establishment of school choice policies. Parent choice, as a policy, has not been the tradition in the American educational system. Yet, in President Bush's (1990) America 2000: An Education Strategy, it is argued that giving all parents the right to choose the school for their children would be preferable to the current situation where "Rich parents, white and nonwhite, already have school choice. They can move, or pay for private schooling" (p. 31).

Raywid (1989), a leading proponent of public school choice, contends that "there is abundant evidence that public school parents want choice, that they are more satisfied with and have more confidence in schools that provide it, that parent choice increases commitment and cohesion within schools extending it, and

that these attributes combine to improve school quality and to make schools more effective" (p.15).

While many contend, as Raywid, that a parent having the right to choose a school will bring about positive results for the child and ultimately for the educational system, others argue that parents will not exercise this choice wisely. Sewall (1991) argues that the reasons parents will choose another school will be determined by distance or the best athletic program rather than the best educational program. He states that "skeptics rightly caution that people can make bad choices. Distance could be a prime consideration in school choice (not just in exurban areas), and the lure of a successful sports program might be more compelling than that of a school's library or science labs" (p. 208).

There is also debate on the differences in educational programs between chosen and resident schools. To what extent do chosen schools have a more enriching curriculum? Is there a better student/teacher ratio in the chosen school? Are there more resources? And, are these elements the motivating factors for a parent to transfer their child? Driscoll (1991) examined schools of choice and the attitudes of the parents and students who opted for transfer. She found that even though the data do not support the thesis that schools of choice provide more services and have more resources, parents still indicated more satisfaction with their chosen school. How does this then relate to the reasons parents have for changing schools? Is the change more an empowerment issue than one of finding the best educational

environment for the child? Are there other factors beside resources and services that motivate parents to change schools? How does the parents' philosophy or approach to education affect their decision to change schools?

Whether parents are choosing a school for the "right" reasons and whether the transfer is resulting in a "better" school will continue to be debated. What is apparent is that school choice is a reform desired by American parents as witnessed by their positive response in a 1991 Gallup poll question (Kappan, 1991). Sixty-two percent of parents wanted the opportunity to choose a school for their child.

Included in the group of parents opting for public school choice are parents of children with disabilities and special needs. Recent tracking studies that examined Minnesota's school choice programs found students with disabilities or special needs accessing school choice programs. Minnesota was the first state to initiate comprehensive school choice legislation and has seven enrollment option programs. These options include Postsecondary Enrollment Options, a program that allows juniors and seniors in high school to take classes at the state's universities and private colleges for college and high school credit. The options also include High School Graduation Incentives, Education Programs for Pregnant Minors and Minor Parents, Area Learning Centers, and Alternative Schools for at-risk students. The newest school choice option is the establishment of Charter Schools. These schools are educationally, financially, and legally independent from a school district; yet, they still receive state funds. Open

Enrollment, a program that allows students to apply for transfer between school districts, is one of the newest school choice programs and one of the most far-reaching. Only a lack of space or the transfer resulting in noncompliance with desegregation rules are accepted as reasons for denial of transfer into a new school district. In Table 1 each of the enrollment options is defined.

Students with disabilities comprised approximately five to seven percent of the school choice participants in Minnesota's Open Enrollment and Postsecondary Enrollment Options. The percentage of students participating in second chance types of enrollment options such as High School Graduation Incentives and Alternative Schools was considerably greater (19%) (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1991; Ysseldyke & Lange, 1991; Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1992). Minnesota's special education population is approximately 10% of the state's total public school enrollment.

It is encouraging to note that students with disabilities are participating in this newest reform. However, little is known about why parents choose to have their child with a disability go to a school in another district. There is much conjecture about the characteristics of parents, in general, who decide to exercise school choice. But, when a parent has a child with a disability, what compels them to choose a school other than their resident school? What are the characteristics of families who have a child with a disability that choose to access school choice? Are the reasons related to provision of special education services? How does the transfer affect parent involvement?

Table 1

Minnesota Enrollment Options Programs

Learners in Minnesota have several enrollment option programs which allow them to choose the school or education program they wish to attend.

Postsecondary Enrollment Options program	Provides 11th and 12th grade students, who qualify for the postsecondary institution of their choice, the opportunity to take college courses for high school credit. The program gives the student choice of a wider variety or more advanced courses than may be available in their high school.
Open Enrollment Program	Allows students kindergarten through 12th grade the opportunity to apply to attend a school outside the district in which they live. Applications are due in the non-resident district before January 1, except for those choosing to enter or leave districts with desegregation plans.
High School Graduation Incentives Program	Designed for students who are not likely to graduate or who have dropped out of school before getting their diplomas. These learners may choose from a variety of education options to complete the requirements needed to graduate.
Area Learning Centers	Offer personalized education programs, year round, day and evening, to accommodate the needs of learners. A wide variety of courses, leading to diplomas, are taught using alternative methods of instruction. Additional services are provided to assure each learner's success. Learners aged 12 through adult may attend.
Public or Private Alternative Programs	Personalize the education of learners at risk of not completing high school. Classes are taught using alternative methods and flexible scheduling. These programs are offered during the typical school day and year.
Education Programs for Pregnant Minors and Minor Parents	Designed to encourage parenting and pregnant teens to continue their education and receive their high school diplomas. A variety of education options are available. Child care and transportation may be arranged.
Charter Schools	Educationally, financially, and legally independent from a school district. They can be started by licensed teachers who get permission from the State Board of Education and their local school board. They are run by an independent elected board of directors.

Source: Minnesota Department of Education.

In this paper, we examine the participation of special education students in one of Minnesota's enrollment options, Open Enrollment. This option has been available for all school districts since the 1990-1991 school year. During that school year 5,940 students participated in the option. Over five percent of these participants were students with disabilities or special needs. We look at participation from the perspective of the parents of students with disabilities who choose to apply for Open Enrollment. We document their responses to a survey that was sent to all applicants of Open Enrollment who indicated their child had a disability or special need. The following questions are addressed:

- To what extent are there differences in demographic characteristics (age, gender, geographic location, etc.) of the students with disabilities who transfer through Open Enrollment and those who do not?
- What are the reasons parents give for choosing or not choosing to transfer?
- To what extent do the reasons for transfer differ as a function of disability category, location , grade level or parents' income or education level?
- How did the parents of students who transfer learn about Open Enrollment?
- How was parent involvement affected by participation in Open Enrollment?
- Who was the central figure in the decision to change schools?

Method

A survey was developed to elicit information from parents of children with disabilities or special needs who had applied for Open Enrollment for the 1990-1991 school year. The Federal classification of disabilities was used to identify disability categories. Gifted, English as Second Language (ESL), and Chapter I were included in the special needs area.

The survey asked for demographic information, status of transfer (whether the student transferred or not), type of special education service for each of the applicants, and reasons for transferring or not transferring. For those parents whose children actually transferred, additional information was collected about the source of Open Enrollment information, degree of parental involvement in school, the transfer decision-making process, and the income and education levels of the parents.

All students desiring transfer through Open Enrollment must complete an application by December 31st prior to a September transfer. Applications for the 1990-1991 school year were made available to us by the Minnesota Department of Education. All applications were reviewed for inclusion in this study and only those students who had applied for transfer and had completed a section entitled "special needs" were initially included in the study.

It was clear after reviewing the applications that not all students completing the special needs section were those with disabilities or being served by special education. Thus, phone

calls were made to the parents of any applicant whose response in the "special needs" section was ambiguous and only those whose application or follow-up phone call clearly established their disability category or were in a Gifted, ESL, or Chapter I program were sent the survey. If a parent had more than one child with a disability or special need transferring schools through Open Enrollment, they were sent a survey for each child.

The survey consisted of 21 questions; each with possible responses listed. Most questions also included an opportunity for an open-ended response. Parents could include additional comments at the end of the survey. A cover letter from the Coordinator of Enrollment Options at the Minnesota Department of Education accompanied the survey. She encouraged the parents to cooperate and a $1.00 gift certificate for use at McDonald's Restaurants was enclosed.

Follow-up phone calls were made to all parents who had not returned the surveys within two weeks. Parents were encouraged to complete and send in the surveys.

Of the 347 surveys sent, 251 (72%) were returned. The total number of families responding was 219. Two hundred nine (83%) of the students were reported as transferring under Open Enrollment and 39 (16%) were reported as not transferring during the 1990-1991 school year. Three (1%) respondents returned the survey but did not answer any of the questions. A random sample of 45 of the respondents were interviewed over the telephone to verify the results of the written survey. Responses reported from the phone surveys corroborated the written survey results.

Table 2

Disability/Special Needs Category of Transferred and Nontransferred Students

Category (n=248)	%	Frequency
Autism	0	0
Early Childhood Special Education	04	09
Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	11	27
Hard of Hearing and Deaf	05	12
Learning Disability	38	93
Mental Retardation	07	16
Multiple Handicaps	01	03
Other Health Impaired	03	07
Orthopedic Handicap	04	09
Speech	18	44
Visual Impairment	02	06
English as a Second Language (ESL)	02	06
Gifted	15	37
Other	05	12
None	08	20

Note: Parents could identify more than one disability or special need area for their child.

In Table 2 we report the percentages of applicants (transfers and non-transfers) identified as being served in special education or special services areas (Gifted, ESL, Chapter I). Respondents could choose more than one category. The learning disability category was chosen by the most respondents (38%) with other categories being mentioned by 1 to 18% of respondents. No applicants were reported being served in a program for autism.

Since the focus of our research is on students with disabilities, the results reported below are based on only those surveys where Open Enrollment applicants were identified as having a specific disability (as defined by the federal classification of disabilities). Of the surveys returned 173 (70%) reported the applicant had a disability.

Demographic information and reasons for transfer or non-transfer are presented for all respondents reporting disabilities followed by the results of the more in-depth questions asked of only the parents with transferring children.

Results

Students with Disabilities

Demographics

Gender. Sixty percent of the students transferring were male, 40% were female. The percentages were more discrepant for those students not transferring: 69% male and 31% female.

Ethnic Origin. A majority of the students applying through Open Enrollment were white; 93% of those transferring and 97% of those not transferring. Asian, Hispanic, and Native American

Table 3

Grade Level of Transferred and Nontransferred Students with Disabilities

Grade	Transferred (n=141) %	Nontransferred (n=32) %
Preschool	04	0
K	05	13
1	06	13
2	09	0
3	05	0
4	07	03
5	04	03
6	09	09
7	11	09
8	07	13
9	09	13
10	09	0
11	08	09
12	07	09
Unidentified	01	06

groups were represented in percentages from 1 to 3%. There were no African American applicants.

Grade Level. For those applicants who transferred there was a fairly even distribution among grade levels with slight increases at transition grades (6th-7th and 9th-10th). There was more scattered representation for non-transfers. In Table 3 we report the percentages at each grade level for all applicants, transferring students, and non-transferring students.

Locale. Applicants were located in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Fifty-two percent of all applicants reported living in rural areas, 34% in suburban areas, and 14% in urban areas. There was little difference in location between those transferring and those choosing not to transfer.

Type of Disability. In Table 4 we report the disability categories of transferring and non-transferring students with disabilities. Respondents whose children did not transfer answered an open-ended question about their child's special needs. These responses were combined with the information from the Open Enrollment applications to give us a profile of the non-transferring group's disability designations.,

Respondents whose child did transfer completed the survey by checking the disability area or areas in which their child was receiving special education services. Students with learning disabilities (54%) were the largest group receiving services for all applicants with disabilities.

Although transferring and non-transferring groups had similar proportions of students in the various disabilities groups, there

Table 4

Disability Category of Transferred and Nontransferred Students with Disabilities

Category	Transferred (n=141) %	Transferred (n=141) Freq	Nontransferred (n=32) %	Nontransferred (n=32) Freq	Total (n=173) %	Total (n=173) Freq
Autism	0	0	0	0	0	0
Early Childhood Special Education	06	08	03	01	05	09
Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	13	18	27	09	16	27
Hard of Hearing and Deaf	06	09	09	03	07	12
Learning Disability	57	80	41	13	54	93
Mental Retardation	10	14	06	02	09	16
Multiple Handicaps	01	02	03	01	02	03
Other Health Impaired	03	04	09	03	04	07
Orthopedic Handicap	05	07	06	02	05	09
Speech	27	38	19	06	25	44
Visual Impairment	03	04	06	02	03	06
Other	05	07	13	04	06	11

Note: Parents could identify more than one disability for their child.

was some discrepancy. There was a greater percentage of non-transfer students being served in programs for emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) (27% vs. 13%) and in programs for students with other health impairments (OHI) (9% vs. 3%) than in the group that transferred.

Reasons for Transfer or Non-transfer.

Students Choosing Not To Transfer. Respondents for children who did not transfer were asked an open-ended question about their decision to not transfer school districts. Respondents gave several reasons for not transferring. These included moving into the district of choice, choosing a parochial school instead of the non-resident public school, transferring under interdistrict agreement instead of Open Enrollment and many other reasons. Only three students were denied entrance to their district of choice and two students dropped out of school before the transfer.

Transfer Students. Respondents were given a list of 32 possible reasons for transfer and asked to circle any reasons that applied to their decision to transfer school districts. They were also asked to indicate the most important reason for transfer.

Items were sorted into six categories: Utility, Environment, Program, Special Education Services, Drop-out Avoidance, and Dissatisfaction With Former School. These broad categories were defined prior to the distribution of the survey. Reasons relating to utility such as transferring because the chosen school is closer to home or closer to daycare were included under the Utility category. These reasons were not thought to be a matter of convenience, however. In many cases parents commented on how

being able to send their child to the district in which their daycare provider resided was beneficial to their child as it provided the consistency the child needed. Thus, this category was labeled Utility as the reasons provided usefulness to the family that appeared to also be in the best interests of the child.

The Environment category included reasons related to the physical nature of the building as well as the make-up of the student body (school size, discipline problems, socioeconomic background of students etc.). Those reasons that described the building or the general environment of the school were in this category.

The reasons relating to curriculum, extracurricular activities, teachers, and courses were listed under the Program category. The Drop-out Avoidance category included reasons pertaining to staying in school. All reasons directly related to Special Education Services were included in the Special Education Service category. One category, Dissatisfaction with Former School District, had only one reason included, "We were unhappy with our former school district." This category seems to stand alone as it is more global in nature.

In Table 5 we list the reasons under each broad category. A rank ordering of individual reasons within category is included. When percentages of respondents endorsing items within a category are averaged across items for each category, the broader categories are endorsed by 20% to 27% of the respondents; with the Special Education Services (M=27%) and Utility (M=26%) categories

being chosen by the most respondents. The individual reason "Dissatisfaction with Former School" was selected by 40% of the parents. The Environmental category was chosen by the fewest respondents (M=20%).

When the 32 reasons are analyzed separately there is wide scatter among the reasons chosen. A majority of the respondents indicated that they believed their child's special education needs were better met at the chosen school (64%). Four other reasons were chosen by many respondents: "Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention" (41%), "Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school" (40%), "We were unhappy with our former school district" (40%), and "Special Education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress" (38%). Only one reason was not chosen by any respondents, "The chosen school has easier graduation requirements."

Responses were also analyzed according to where the students lived, their grade level, their disability, and their parents' educational level and income. The reasons were grouped into the broader categories listed above and the mean percentage of the responses within each broad category was analyzed. The comparisons are outlined below.

Reasons by Location

In Table 6 we report the percentage of respondents in each of the locales (urban, suburban, and rural) and the reasons they indicated for transferring schools by the broader categories of Utility, Environment, Program, Special Education Services, Drop-

Table 5

Reasons for Using Open Enrollment

Reason for Transfer	% of Total Endorsing Item
Utility	
The chosen school is closer to home.	31
The chosen school is closer to my job or spouse's job.	23
The chosen school has a day-care program, or is closer to someone who takes care of my child.	16
Our child's friends, brothers, or sisters attend(ed) the new school.	40
We moved out of the district, but wanted our child to remain in old district for his/her education.	21
	Mean=26%
Environment	
The chosen school has less problems with student discipline.	28
We were happier with the social and economic background of the students at the chosen school.	27
The chosen school provides a safer environment.	26
The chosen school has smaller class sizes.	23
The chosen school has fewer students.	20
The chosen school is a nicer, cleaner building.	17
The chosen school is bigger and has more students.	16
Students at the chosen school get better grades and score higher on tests to get into colleges/jobs.	11
We were happier with the racial or ethnic composition of the student body at the chosen school.	09
	Mean=20%
Dropout Avoidance	
The chosen school gave my child a fresh start.	36
The chosen school might encourage my child to stay in school.	23
School staff strongly urged my child to change schools.	04
	Mean=21%

Table 5 (continued)

Reasons for Using Open Enrollment

Reason for Transfer	% of Total Endorsing Item
Program	
Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention.	41
The chosen school has better teachers.	33
The chosen school offers more course variety.	31
The chosen school offers my child better athletic and extracurricular opportunities.	16
The chosen school has more opportunities for parent participation.	14
The chosen school has more advanced courses and programs for gifted students.	09
The chosen school has easier graduation requirements.	00
	Mean=21%
Special Education	
My child's Special Education needs are better met at the chosen school.	64
Special Education teachers at the chosen school keep me more informed of my child's progress.	38
The chosen school gives my child more options in his/her Special Education program.	33
The chosen school mainstreams my child into more regular education classes.	21
The chosen school placed my child in a Special Ed. program and our school district would not.	04
The chosen school did not place my child in a Special Ed. program, and our resident school did.	03
	Mean=27%
Dissatisfaction with Former School District	
We were unhappy with our former school district.	40

out Avoidance, and Dissatisfaction with Former School. A close look at the data reveals differences between the groups in their reasons for transfer. Those living in an urban area more often chose reasons relating to Environment than those living in suburban or rural areas. Reasons within the Special Education Services group and the Drop-out Avoidance group were chosen more often by those living in suburban or rural locations. Parents from the urban and rural grouped chose the Dissatisfaction reason more often than those from the suburban area.

When the individual reasons are reviewed within the broader categories some interesting responses should be noted. Even though, as a whole, there was little difference between the mean responses for the Utility category, those from the rural area chose "The chosen school has a day care program, or is close to someone who takes care of my child" considerably more than those from the other two areas (33% rural, 16% suburban, 11% urban). The urban parents chose reasons from the environmental group more often except for "The chosen school is bigger and has more students" which was chosen more often by those from the rural area (27% rural, 6% suburban, 0 urban).

Reasons by Disability

The reasons respondents gave for transfer were also grouped according to the disability reported on the survey. Respondents could select more than one disability classification and 31 respondents did report more than one. There is some duplication of reasons as a result.

Table 6

Reasons by Location

Reason for Transfer	Urban (n=18) Mean %	Suburban (n=50) Mean%	Rural (n=73) Mean %	Total (n=141) Mean %
Utility	22	25	28	26
Environment	27	16	20	20
Program	21	17	23	21
Special Education Services	21	28	28	27
Dropout Avoidance	11	20	24	21
Dissatisfaction (based on one item)	39	34	44	40

In Table 7 we report the mean percentage of the individual reasons within each broad category for the disability groupings. There were differences between the broad categories and frequency with which the different disability groupings chose those reasons. Respondents of children in EBD programs and multiple handicaps chose Drop-out Avoidance reasons more often than the other respondents. Environmental reasons were chosen most often by respondents who had children with visual impairments. Special Education Service reasons were most often cited by respondents with children with mental retardation. It should be noted that these results are based on few respondents for those in low prevalence disability categories.

Reasons by Grade Levels

Reasons were also examined by the grade levels of the Open Enrollment participants. To facilitate analysis, students were separated into a kindergarten through sixth grade group (elementary) and a seventh through 12th grade group (secondary). Utility reasons were chosen most often by respondents whose children were in kindergarten through sixth grade. There were very few differences between the broad categories of Environment, Program, and Special Education Services for the two groups. However, Drop-out Avoidance reasons and Dissatisfaction with Former School were chosen more often by those in secondary schools. These results are reported in Table 8.

Reasons by Parents' Educational Level

The highest educational level of the mother or father was used to analyze the reasons for transferring schools by

Table 7

Reasons by Disability Category

Reason for Transfer (Mean %)	EBD (n=18)	HI (n=9)	LD (n=80)	MR (n=14)	MULT (n=2)	PHYS (n=7)	SP (n=38)	VI (n=4)	OHI (n=4)
Utility	29	33	24	20	50	20	33	20	40
Environment	22	12	23	16	22	03	19	39	19
Program	24	13	23	26	29	16	21	21	32
Special Ed.Ser.	36	20	30	45	42	38	26	42	33
Dropout Avoidance	43	11	26	07	50	00	07	17	33
Dissatisfaction (based on one item)	50	22	50	50	50	43	32	25	75

Table 8

Reasons by Grade Level

Reason for Transfer	Grades K-6 (n=62) Mean %	Grades 7-12 (n=72) Mean %
Utility	30	23
Environment	18	22
Program	20	21
Special Ed. Services	28	26
Dropout Avoidance	15	28
Dissatisfaction (based on one item)	27	50

educational level. The sample was divided into those parents who had (1) high school education or less, (2) some college, and (3) four or more years of college. In Table 9 we present the reasons by parents' educational level. There was very little difference between the mean responses in the broad categories except for the Utility category when comparing parents' educational level. The Utility category had the greatest disparity between educational groupings with those with some college education choosing it most often.

When individual reasons are examined within the broad categories some interesting responses are noted. Parents with a high school education or less chose some individual reasons considerably more often than the other education groups. In the Program category, these reasons were "The chosen school has better teachers" and "Teachers at the chosen school can give my child more personal attention."

Reasons by Family Income

There is a wide variation of means when reasons are analyzed by family income. No one income level reveals a trend in any of the categories. These data are presented in Table 10.

Additional Survey Results

The following information was gathered from only those respondents whose child had transferred during the 1990-1991 school year.

Sources of Information About Open Enrollment. Respondents were asked to identify all sources of information which were relevant to their decision to use Open Enrollment. They were then

Table 9

Reasons by Parents' Educational Level

Reason for Transfer	High School or Less (n=29) Mean %	Some College (n=71) Mean %	Four or More Yrs. College (n=41) Mean %
Utility	18	31	22
Environment	20	21	17
Program	22	20	21
Special Ed. Services	24	26	30
Dropout Avoidance	17	23	20
Dissatisfaction (based on one item)	41	38	41

Table 10

Reasons by Family Income (in thousands)

Reason for Transfer (Mean %)	<10 (n=8)	10-20 (n=21)	20-30 (n=24)	30-40 (n=27)	40-50 (n=22)	50-75 (n=19)	>75 (n=12)
Utility	33	25	29	27	22	25	25
Environment	17	24	22	17	21	16	25
Program	13	24	24	16	22	11	32
Special Ed.Ser.	27	28	24	23	31	27	31
Dropout Avoidance	21	25	22	19	26	14	22
Dissatisfaction (based on one item)	63	57	46	22	41	37	42

asked to indicate the one most valuable source of information. A rank ordering of sources appears in Table 11. Respondents had the option of writing in their own source if it was not covered in the choices listed. Most people said they heard about the Open Enrollment option from the media (47%), principals (36%), teachers (29%), and friends and neighbors (28%). When respondents indicated the most important source of information, the media and school principals were the sources most often cited. Fifty-five percent of the respondents said that their sources of Open Enrollment information included information on special education; 40% reported that no information on special education was given to them.

How was the Decision Made? Respondents were asked who was involved in the decision to change schools. Responses ranged from a complete parent/guardian decision to the student making the decision on their own. Forty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that all agreed that a change of schools would be best for the student. Twenty-one percent said that they had made the decision because their child was too young to participate in the decision. Six percent indicated that they were neutral about the transfer, but their child strongly wanted to change schools. Four percent indicated that the child was neutral, but parents felt a change of school was best, 1% stated that their child was against the change but parents wanted transfer. No respondents indicated that the parents were against the change but the child wanted to transfer.

Table 11

The Source of Information about the Open Enrollment Option for Transferred Students with Disabilities

(n=141)	Source of Information %	Source of Information Freq	Most Important %	Most Important Freq
Teacher	29	41	10	14
Counselor	16	22	5	7
Principal	36	51	20	29
Children	10	14	5	7
Family member	15	21	4	5
Friend/neighbor	28	40	10	14
Employer	2	3	1	1
Social worker	4	6	1	1
Brochure	9	12	1	1
School news	18	26	2	3
Radio, TV, news	47	66	17	24
Options hot line	2	3	1	2
Informal meeting	11	15	2	3
Social service agency	1	1	0	0
Don't remember	1	1	0	0
Other	16	22	10	14
Missing	2	3	11	16

Parent Involvement. Respondents were asked to indicate school activities in which they were involved at the former school and chosen school. As can be seen in Table 12, more parents were involved in attending school events and contacting their child's teachers at the chosen school than at the "old" school. Transportation appeared to limit involvement slightly more at the chosen school than at the former school.

Parent Information. Information about parents' level of education is provided in Table 13. The majority of respondents had at least some college education. In Table 14 we report the total family income of those students transferring. The income level of parents was fairly evenly distributed among income groupings with those groupings with the highest and lowest incomes reporting the fewest families.

Discussion

The advent of school choice programs has produced a major change in the educational landscape in the last few years. Parents of students with disabilities are accessing this school reform as are many other parents around the country. In this paper we report the results of a survey sent to parents of students with disabilities who applied for transfer through one of Minnesota's school choice programs, Open Enrollment. The characteristics of the applicants were investigated, as were the reasons for transfer or non-transfer. The source of school choice information, the effects of school choice on parent involvement, and the decision-making process were also examined.

Table 12

Parental Involvements of Transferred Students with Disabilities

(n=141)	Former School %	Former School Freq	Chosen School %	Chosen School Freq
PTA	13	18	9	12
Volunteers	16	23	10	14
Attend school event	71	100	80	113
Frequent teacher contact	67	95	82	116
District committee	4	5	1	1
School committee	14	20	9	12
Involve occasionally	29	41	33	47
Not involved	8	11	7	10
Transportation problem	13	18	21	29
Other	3	4	7	10
Missing	2	3	2	3
N/A	9	12	0	0

Table 13

Highest Level of Education for the Parents/Guardians of the Transferred Students with Disabilities

Level of Education	Father		Mother	
	%	n	%	n
<High school	7	10	4	5
High school	31	43	26	36
Some college	34	48	51	72
4 years college	5	7	8	11
>4 years college	15	21	11	16
Missing	9	12	1	1

Table 14

Family Income for the Transferred Students with Disabilities

Family Income	%	n
<10,000	6	8
10,000 - 20,000	15	21
20,000 - 30,000	17	24
30,000 - 40,000	20	27
40,000 - 50,000	16	22
50,000 - 75,000	14	19
>75,000	9	12
Missing	6	8

Characteristics

Family Income Level. For some, the argument against school choice has been that only highly educated, affluent parents would access a reform that required such a high level of parental involvement. The parents of students with disabilities who are accessing Open Enrollment, however, do not appear to fall into those categories. While a slight majority have some college education, only 20% of the fathers and 19% of the mothers reported having a college degree. Family income is distributed across income levels rather evenly with as many families participating in Open Enrollment with incomes of less than $30,000 as above $40,000.

Disability Categories. The characteristics of the students with disabilities who transfer are also of interest. The group consists primarily of white students fairly evenly distributed between elementary and secondary schools. The students are evenly distributed between rural and metropolitan locations. This is consistent with the 1990 population distribution reported by the United States Census Bureau for the state of Minnesota (1990 Census of Population and Housing). More males than females applied for transfer which also follows the pattern of participation for students served in special education (Ysseldyke & Algozzine, p.29). The disability categories reported by respondents are consistent with the proportions reported by the Minnesota Department of Education for the 1990-1991 school year (Minnesota Department of Education, 1991).

Ethnicity. It should be noted that there was no Open Enrollment participation of African-American students with disabilities during the 1990-1991 school year. There are alternate explanations for this finding. Since the majority of African-American students reside in the urban areas where stipulations are put on transfer, any African-American students from outside these areas would not be allowed to transfer into the urban school districts. However, there would be ample opportunity for those from the urban school districts to transfer to the suburban districts. This may not be considered necessary as the two largest urban districts have extensive intradistrict choice programs. The availability of school choice within the resident district may influence the participation of African-American students who reside in the urban areas. For those from urban areas who do consider out-of-district transfer, transportation difficulties may be an issue. Another possible explanation for the lack of participation of African-American students with disabilities may have to do with the dissemination of information about Open Enrollment. Is information about Open Enrollment reaching these students and their families? Further investigation is necessary into the reasons for the lack of participation by African-American students with disabilities.

There are some discrepancies that should be noted in the subject group. When the survey results of this study are compared with the results from a recent tracking study (Ysseldyke & Lange, 1992) that investigated the extent of transfer through Open Enrollment in Minnesota's school districts, a discrepancy in

disability participation is noted. In the tracking study, Directors of Special Education were asked to complete a survey to indicate the number of students with disabilities transferring using the various enrollment options available in Minnesota. The results of the study indicated that there were considerably more students with emotional/behavioral disorders transferring schools than would be expected given the proportion of students with emotional/behavioral disorders in Minnesota's special education population. The parent survey does not verify this information, as the proportion of students with emotional/behavioral disorders is reported as being consistent with Minnesota's overall EBD population.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that parents of students with emotional/behavioral disorders are less likely to report their child's disability and identify another disability so as not to prejudice those working with their child or in anyway cause discrimination by a school district. This fear could impact results of a study such as this one since we relied on parents to report their child's disability category. It is also possible that although the student is receiving services for emotional or behavioral disorders, the parents have not had this clearly explained to them. In any case, the discrepancy should be further investigated to establish the reason for the difference in reported participation by students served in EBD programs.

Although the majority of applicants with disabilities transferred schools, it is interesting to note that the characteristics of the non-transfers varied slightly from those

who transferred. A higher percentage of students who did not transfer were being served by EBD programs (28% vs. 13%) than was found in the transfer group or the state's population of students with disabilities. Even though more boys than girls were applying for Open Enrollment, a still higher percentage of males (60% males vs. 40% females) were deciding to not transfer schools after initially applying for Open Enrollment.

Reasons for Transfer

Reasons for transferring schools vary greatly between the respondents. However, certain themes do emerge from an informal analysis of the reasons for transfer. Five reasons stand out and provide a profile that may help us understand why parents of students with disabilities choose to transfer their child to a different district.

A majority of parents of students with disabilities felt their child's special education needs would be better met in the chosen school district (64%). Contrary to the belief that parents are choosing schools for convenience or extracurricular activities, this finding indicates that parents are evaluating special education programs and that how they perceive the programs contributes to their decision to change schools.

The opportunity for their child to receive more personal attention was important to many of our respondents (42%) as was being kept informed by the special education teachers (37%). In addition, it was important for parents that their child attend school with their siblings or friends. Forty percent chose this as a reason for transfer.

Although a large percentage (40%) of parents indicated that they were dissatisfied with the former school, equally important to note is that 60% did not give this as a reason. To be sure, dissatisfaction with the former school plays a part in the transfer for many parents, but it was not chosen by a majority of parents. Far more parents chose "My child's special education needs are better met at the chosen school" (64%) leading to the observation that for a majority of parents the motivating factor when deciding upon transfer may be finding the best educational alternative for the child.

If the reasons that were chosen by the highest number of parents are organized into a profile it could be said that parents of students with disabilities are seeking to have their child in an educational system that meets their special education needs, where there is frequent communication with parents, where their child receives personal attention, and can attend school with siblings or friends.

Driscoll (1991) investigated schools of choice and their programs and resources in relationship to parent satisfaction. Although, no differences between the schools of choice and the resident schools in their use of resources, teachers etc. could be found (Sosniak & Ethington, 1991), parents who chose to transfer were still more satisfied with their child's education. Driscoll speculates that perhaps other qualities in the school that were not measured in the study contribute to parent satisfaction. She notes "The measures of teacher quality included in this data tell us little about what a teacher really brings into a classroom,

less about how she uses that, and nothing at all about how much she cares for her students" (p.16). Our findings would further support her observation as we find that parents may be transferring their child to a new school because of reasons that have little to do with educational programming and resources, but, more to do with how a child's needs are met and the interaction between the teacher and the student. These reasons may be more central to why parents choose to access school choice.

Reasons as a function of income, educational level, location, grade level or disability.

When reasons were grouped into broader categories to determine the extent to which certain characteristics affected transfer some interesting findings were noted. In general, no trend could be attributed to the educational level or family income. This again should be noted as some opponents to school choice contend that only those affluent parents with higher educational levels will access a program involving choice. However, the evidence from this study supports the notion that school choice is being accessed by parents from all income and educational levels and that when it comes to the reasons for transfer there is very little apparent difference between these groups. However, where the family resides, the child's grade level and the child's disability do seem to contribute to differences in reasons for transfer. Those parents whose families live in an urban area chose environmental reasons more frequently than those from suburban or rural areas. When the individual reasons within the Environmental category are examined 44% of the

parents living in an urban area whose child transferred chose "The chosen school provides a safer environment" and 44% chose "The chosen school has less problems with student discipline." All environmental reasons except "The chosen school is bigger and has more students" were chosen more often by those living in the urban area. These findings would lead one to speculate that for these parents their reasons for choosing Open Enrollment had more to do with seeking another environment for their child than an attempt to provide specific special education services. And, when the Special Education Services category is examined, the urban group chose reasons from this category less often than parents from the suburban or rural areas.

The grade level of the child transferring schools also seems to contribute to the reasons for transfer. Where there was little difference between the elementary students and the secondary students in the Environment, Program, and Special Education Services categories; there were differences in the Utility, Dropout Avoidance, and Dissatisfaction with Former School categories. The parents of younger students more often chose reasons in the Utility category. Since many of them still require daycare it would follow that educational decisions are made with daycare arrangements in mind.

The parents of older students chose reasons from the Dropout Avoidance and the Dissatisfaction categories. The individual reasons of "The chosen school gave my child a fresh start" (49%) and "The chosen school might encourage my child to stay in school" (32%) were chosen by a large percentage of parents of children in

the seventh through twelfth grades. It is interesting to note that secondary students may be using Open Enrollment as a way to stay in school and to avoid dropping out. This may be particularly beneficial to students with disabilities who may have been labeled or "pegged" as being a certain type of student either by the staff or their peers. Where in the past, the student had to live with a reputation, the ability to change schools can now be seen as an avenue for a fresh start in a new educational environment.

There appears to be some differences between disability groups and the parents' reasons for Open Enrollment. Most glaring is the percentage of parents of students identified as being served in emotional/behavioral disorders programs and their identification of reasons in the Dropout Avoidance category. This finding again supports the idea that Open Enrollment may be the method that some families are using to help their child with a disability stay in school; especially if the disability is an emotional or behavioral disorder. It strengthens the argument that giving the parents, and ultimately the child, the right to choose schools will have a positive effect on educational outcomes for the student.

Implications and Limitations

It should be noted that in this study we examined only one of Minnesota's enrollment options, Open Enrollment. Minnesota, as with many states, has several types of enrollment options in which students with disabilities are participating (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1991; Ysseldyke & Lange, 1991; Gorney & Ysseldyke, 1992,

Ysseldyke, Lange, & Delaney, 1992). It should not be concluded from this study that these respondents are the only participants with disabilities participating in school choice in Minnesota. However, this study does provide a starting point for understanding how "choice" is being perceived by parents who ultimately are the ones who choose. Further investigations into reasons parents and students choose the other options will add to this understanding.

Though the rate of response for the survey was high (70%), a limitation to the study is the possibility that students with disabilities were applying for Open Enrollment but not indicating their special need on the application form. However, in a recent study (Ysseldyke & Lange, 1992), in which we tracked students with disabilities participating in Open Enrollment we found similar Open Enrollment participation rates. This leads us to believe that though we may have missed some students who did not indicate a special need on the application, we have contacted the majority of students with disabilities transferring through this option.

Although parents were quite willing to give reasons they chose the new school a limitation should be noted. The parents were surveyed approximately a year after they initially decided to apply for Open Enrollment. Their child had attended the new school for nearly one school year. Consequently, the reasons they gave could have been influenced by their experiences at the new school and could be more a reaction to the new school than an actual reason for transfer. In further research we will question

a group of parents prior to transfer to ascertain if their reasons are similar to this sample.

The study has implications for administrators and teachers as they reflect on how this newest school reform will be played out in school districts around the country. A review of the reasons parents give for transferring their child to a different school district gives food for thought. Administrators may use this information to determine the role their special education programs have on student movement through school choice. Teachers can use this information to review their relationship with parents and how it affects parent satisfaction.

The study also has implications for advocacy groups who are interested in advising parents about school choice. It provides a backdrop from which to discuss why a parent may choose another school and how this has affected school involvement for this set of parents.

It also has import for policy makers who are evaluating school choice around the country. Here is one set of parents with a well-defined group of students and their response to Open Enrollment and why they chose this route for their child. Understanding the reasons they choose Open Enrollment will enable policy makers to be mindful of this group of students and their needs as they tailor school choice programs.

Finally, while this survey provided in-depth information about students with disabilities who access Open Enrollment, it did not answer the question of whether students with disabilities who transfer are receiving better service in their chosen

district. It also did not directly address the satisfaction of parents with the new or "chosen" school. Further investigations are planned to ascertain the impact of Open Enrollment on students' programs, how they perceive their progress, and the parents' and students' satisfaction with the chosen school.

References

America 2000: An Education Strategy (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1991).

Driscoll, M. E. (1991, April). Schools of choice in the public sector: Student and parent clientele. Findings from Schools of choice in the public sector. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Education Commission of the States. (1989). Policy guide: A state policy maker's guide to public school choice. Denver, CO: Author

Elam, S. M., Rose, L. C., & Gallup, A. M. (1990). The 23nd annual Gallup poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools. Kappan, 73(1), 41-56.

Gorney, D. J. & Ysseldyke, J. E. (1992). Students with disabilities use of various options to access alternative schools and area learning centers (Research Rep. No. 3). University of Minnesota, Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.

Lange, C. M. & Ysseldyke J. E.(1991). Participation of students with disabilities and special needs in postsecondary enrollment options (Research Rep. No. 1) University of Minnesota, Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.

Minnesota Department of Education (1991). Special education unduplicated child count. St. Paul, MN: MDE.

1990 Census of Population and Housing, 1990: Summary Tape File 1 [machine-readable data files] /prepared by the Bureau of the Census--Washington: The Bureau [producer and distributor], 1991.

Raywid, M. A. (1989). The case for public schools of choice. Monograph of the Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation. Fastback No. 283.

Sewall, G. T. (1991). America 2000, an appraisal. Kappan, 73, 204-209.

Sosniak L. A. & Ethington C. A. (1991, April). Schools of choice and the academic curriculum: Findings from the Choice in the public sector. Symposium conducted at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Ysseldyke, J. E. & Algozzine, B. (1990). Introduction of special education (2nd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Ysseldyke J. E. & Lange, C. M. (1992). Participation of different categories of students with special needs in enrollment options (Research Rep. No. 4). University of Minnesota, Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.

Ysseldyke, J. E. , Lange, C. M., & Delaney, T. J.(1992). School choice programs in the fifty states. (Res. Rep. No. 7). University of Minnesota, Enrollment Options for Students with Disabilities.